

# **The Ancient Arab Calendar**

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## **Introduction**

An understanding of the pre-Islamic calendar requires a knowledge of the lifestyle of the Arabs themselves. Their very survival depended on their ability to observe natural changes all the year round, especially the movement of the stars, the moon, and the sun.

During the *Jahiliyyah* or the Age of Ignorance (the pre-Islamic period), most of the Arabs were illiterate and innumerate. However, they had their religious, commercial, and pasturing seasons. In the pasturing season, they would leave their permanent dwellings and travel hundreds of miles into the heart of the desert in search of food and water for their animals. At the end of the season, they would return home. The practice of transhumance required precise timing, for the desert Arabs would lose not only their animals but also their own lives if the dry season overtook them while they were far from food and water.

Long experience had taught the bedouin Arabs to be continually on the lookout for abundant pasture, and so they were also aware of sudden changes in the weather. Periods of drought and fertility often followed each other in the same region

according to the time of year. In early times, the desert Arabs were guided by the stars when finding their way around the vast desert, as described in the Qur'an:

It is He Who made the stars [as beacons] for you that you may guide yourselves, with their help, through the dark spaces of the land and sea. (6:97)

And marks and signposts, and by the stars [men] guide themselves. (16:16)

The bedouin also used the stars as a guide for calculating the season of transhumance. The cycle of fertility and drought was observed by the rising and setting of certain stars. Examples were al-Thurayya (the Pleiades), al-Najm (the Constellation), Suhayl (Canopus), al-Simakah (Pisces), al-A'zal (Virgo), and al-Ramih (Arcturus).

According to Ibn Qutaybah:

The journey to fresh pasture, when the Arabs leave their permanent dwellings temporarily to look for water and grass for their animals, begins with the rising of Suhayl (Canopus) in the morning. The star appears in the Hijaz on the fourteenth night of Abb (August), and in Iraq on the twenty-sixth night of Abb. Whoever moves at this time will have some rain. Then the people follow one another until the setting of al-Fargh al-Mu'akhkhar (Andromeda), which takes place on the twenty-second night of Ailul (September). This is the beginning of the rainy season, and the people stay at their temporary pasture until the rising of al-Sharatan (Aries) early in the morning after sixteen nights have passed in the month of Nisan (April). Then they begin returning until the rising of al-Thurayyah (Pleiades) on the thirteenth night of Ayyar (May), and they continue on their way home until the rising of al-Haq'ah (Orion) on the ninth night of Huzayran (June). By this time, the waters have dried up and moisture has disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

This system is known as *al-anwa'* (plural of *naw'*). It denotes the acronychal setting and heliacal rising of its opposite (*raqib*). By extension, it is applied to a period.<sup>2</sup>

### **The System of *Anwa'***

To estimate the passage of time, the ancient Arabs resorted to a primitive system, which can be summarized as follows:

1. On the one hand, the acronychal setting of a series of stars or constellations marked the beginning of a period called *naw'*. The duration of the *naw'* proper

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitab al-Anwa' fi Mawasim al-'Arab* (Hyderabad, India: Da'irat al-Ma'arif, 1978), pp.100–103.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Zabidi, *Taj al-'Arus* (Beirut: al-Maktabat al-Khayirah, 1306), Vol. 1, p.129; Jamal al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Mukram ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., vol.1 (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1414 AH/1994 AC), p.175; al-Jahiz, *Kitab al-Hayawan*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., vol.6 (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1338 AH/1969 AC), pp.30–32; Carlo Nallino, *Arabian Astronomy* (Maktabat al-Muthana, 196?), p.107.

was one to seven days. The stars themselves were responsible for rain and were invoked during the *istisqa'* (supplication for rain). Knowledge of these *anwa'* enabled those bedouin who were trained in the science to predict the weather during a given period.

2. On the other hand, the heliacal rising of the same series of stars or constellations, at six-monthly intervals, marked the solar year by fixing the number of periods, probably about twenty-eight. Those maxims which have survived suggest that this was the basis of the calendar.

Some time before the coming of Islam, the Arabs learned to distinguish the *manazil* (plural of *manzila*), meaning “stations” or “mansions” of the moon, which numbered twenty-eight, as stated in the Qur'an:<sup>3</sup>

He it is Who has made the sun a [source of] radiant light and the moon a light [reflected], and has determined for it phases [*manazil*] so that you know how to compute the years and to measure [time]. (10:5)

And [in] the moon, for which We have determined phases [*manazil*] [which it must traverse] till it become like an old date-stalk dried up and curved. (36:39)

Perceiving that the list of these mansions largely corresponded to their own list of *anwa'*, the bedouin Arabs proceeded to combine both ideas and to adjust their *anwa'* to make them coincide with the *manazil*, by dividing the solar zodiac into twenty-eight equal parts of approximately 12 50'. Thus, the twenty-eight *anwa'* identified with the twenty-eight *manazil* are determined by twenty-eight stars or constellations constituting fourteen pairs. Within each pair, the acronychal setting of the one corresponds to the heliacal rising of the other and marks the beginning of twenty-seven periods of thirteen days and one of fourteen.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.1** The lunar stations<sup>5</sup>

Station	Rising	Setting
Al-Sharatan (Aries)	April 22	October 22
Al-Butayn (Aries)	May 5	November 4
Al-Thurayya (Pleiades)	May 18	November 17
Al-Dabaran (Taurus)	May 31	November 30
Al-Haq'ah (Orion)	June 13	December 13
Al-Han'ah [Gemini]	June 26	December 26

<sup>3</sup> H.A.R. Gibb et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edn. (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1960), art. “*Anwa'*”, pp.523–524.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Al-Bayruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah* (Leipzig, Germany: Leipzig, 1876), pp.349–350; Abu al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah wa al-Amkinah*, (Hyderabad, India: Dairat al-Ma'arif, 1912), vol.1, pp.186–197.

Al-Dhira' (Auroral Rising)	July 9	January 8
Al-Nathrah (Praespe)	July 22	January 21
Al-Tarf (Cancer)	August 4	February 3
Al-Jabhah (Algieba)	August 17	February 16
Al-Zubrah (Leo)	August 31	March 1
Al-Şarafah (Departure)	September 13	March 14
Al-'Awwa' (Barking Dog)	September 26	March 27
Al-Simak (Arcturus)	October 9	April 9
Al-Ghafr (The Cover)	October 22	April 22
Al-Zubanah (Acubene)	November 4	May 5
Al-Iklil (Corona)	November 17	May 18
Al-Qalb (Antares)	November 30	May 31
Al-Shawlah (Upsilon)	December 13	June 13
Al-Na'a'im (Pegasus)	December 26	June 26
Al-Baldah (Sagittarius)	January 8	July 9
Sa'd al-Dhabih (Aquarius)	January 21	July 22
Sa'd al-Bula' (Albali)	February 3	August 4
Sa'd al-Su'ud (Aquarius)	February 16	August 17
Sa'd al-Akhbiyah (Aquarius)	March 1	August 31
Al-Fargh al-Muqaddam (Pegasus)	March 14	September 13
Al-Fargh al-Mu'akhhkar (Andromeda)	March 27	September 26
Batn al-Hut (Andromeda)	April 9	October 9

The other method by which the Arabs divided the year was the lunar cycle. They were originally interested in this cycle because of the changes in the weather that occurred in it.

It cannot be stated categorically that the Arabs in the *Jahiliyyah* did not use the lunar month as a unit to measure time. They appear to have been aware of it, as shown in the following verse by the famous pre-Islamic poet, Labid ibn Rabi'ah: "Is the soul aught but a borrowed commodity to be enjoyed, which is lent, and goes to its Lord after some months (*ashhur*)?"<sup>6</sup> Since they used the year (*al-hawl*) as a measuring unit as well as the night (*al-lailah*), it is possible that the concept of the month was not precisely defined in the mind of the Arab in the *Jahiliyyah*. The Arabs used the period between the two crescents for their business transactions. This definition was confirmed by Prophet Muhammad when he marked its beginning and end with the rise of two consecutive crescents instead of by calculation.

Ibn 'Umar reported:

The Messenger of Allah (SAAS) said: "We are an illiterate Ummah; we neither write nor calculate; the month is such and such," and he bent one of his fingers for the third time, which indicates twenty-nine and thirty.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: William & Norgate, 1863), p.2377.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad ibn Isma'il Bukhari, "Bab al-Şawm," in Mustafa al-Bugha (ed.), *Şahih*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Damascus: Al-Yamamah, n.d.), p.13; Muslim, "Bab al-Şiyam," in *Sahih* (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Tijari, n.d.), p.4; Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, "Bab al-Şawm", *Al-Sunan*, vol.4 (Hims, Syria: Dar al-Hadith, 1394 AH/1974 AC); Taqi al-Dīn Ahmad ibn 'Ali al-Maqrizi, *Imtā' al-Asma'*,

Later, Ibn Qutaybah made a distinction between the calculation of the desert Arabs and that of the astronomers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the length of the month in relation to the year and the number of the months in the year were not clearly defined for the Arabs until the following Qur'anic verse was revealed:

Behold! The number of months, in the sight of God, is twelve, [laid down] in God's decree on the day when He created the heavens and the earth; of these, four are sacred. (9:37)

Owing to the pre-Islamic Arabs' imprecise calculation of months and years and the changes in the rainy and dry seasons in the Arabian Peninsula—resulting from the movement of the moon and the stars, which brought rain to different areas—it can be concluded that there was no central calendar common to all in pre-Islamic Arabia. Regions having their own calendars changed them frequently.<sup>9</sup>

According to al-Mas'udi, Makkah and Madinah each had a different calendar, and each city counted the number of days from a different starting point.<sup>10</sup> According to Perceval, the Makkan calendar was luni-solar, beginning in Nisan/April, with the result that the seasons were listed in reverse order.<sup>11</sup> In the view of Mahmud al-Falaki, the Makkan calendar was purely lunar.<sup>12</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Hashim Amir Ali more recently tried to prove that the Makkan calendar was purely solar.<sup>13</sup>

There are various theories of how to adjust the lunar year to conform to the seasons. To make the lunar year correspond to the agricultural year, one month needs to be added after every third year. However, in thirty years, a full month's difference will have accumulated. Another procedure is to add three months in every eight years, though there still remains a difference of one and a half days. Al-Biruni

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vol.1 (Qatar: Wizarat al-Shu'un al-Diniyyah, n.d.), pp.16 & 531.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Qutaibah, *Kitab al-Anwa' fi Mawasim al-'Arab* (Hyderabad, India: Dairat al-Ma'arif, 1978), p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Bayruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, pp.349–450; Abu 'Ali al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah wa al-Amkinah*, (Hyderabad, India: Dairat al-Ma'arif, 1912), vol.1, pp.74–75. Muhammad ibn Habib, *Kitab Al-Muhabbir* (Baghdad: Di'irat Ma'arif, 1942), p.708; Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh*, (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1969), vol.1, p.193.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ali ibn Husain ibn 'Ali al-Mas'udi, *Al-Tanbih wa al-Ishraf* (Beirut: Maktabat Khayyat, 1965), p.206.

<sup>11</sup> Gibb et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam*, p.52.

<sup>12</sup> Mahmud al-Falaki, *Al-Taqwim al-'Arabi Qabla al-Islam* (Cairo, 1969), pp.57, 62 & 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ihsanunabi Alavi, *The Arab Calendar Prevalent during the Lifetime of Muhammad* (Delhi: Rampur Institute of Oriental Studies, 1968), p.12.

believed that the Makkans had resorted to this procedure and that they had borrowed it from the Jews.<sup>14</sup>

There is much confusion shrouding the pre-Islamic Arab calendar. Modern writers, in particular, seldom agree on one theory. However, a certain level of agreement on this point can be found among the classical Muslim historians, which is completely rejected by Mahmud al-Falaki.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the statements of Ibn Qutaybah, Ibn Kunasah, al-Biruni, al-Marzuqi, and al-Qazwini are convincing evidence that the astronomical observations of the desert Arabs were surprisingly correct.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the Arabs were well acquainted with the astronomical sciences, which they applied to the changes of the seasons and the compilation of their calendar. The same evidence proves that the Arab *Rabi'* began with the autumnal equinox rather than the vernal equinox of the Iranian calendar. Ibn Kusanah has given the Syriac dates corresponding to the beginning of every season.<sup>17</sup>

Bearing in mind the guidance and details supplied by al-Bayruni,<sup>18</sup> Ibn Qutaibah, and Ibn Kunasah, the four seasonal points of the Arab year can be arranged as shown in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2** Seasons of the ancient Arabs

Seasons	Months	
	Aramaic/Hebrew	Gregorian
<i>Rabi' I (al-Kharif)</i>	3 Ailul	3 September
<i>Al-Shitā'</i>	3 Kanun I	3 December
<i>Al-Şayf (Rabi' II)</i>	5 Adhar	5 March
<i>Qayz</i>	4 Huzayran	4 June

Source: Al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, p.174.

The Arabs used the term *zaman* to mean “season.” For instance, *zaman* could refer to the season of fruit, or ripe dates, or heat, or cold. It could be a period of two months, that is, any one of the six seasons of the solar year, or six months, that is, the

<sup>14</sup> Al-Bayruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, p.12.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Falaki, *Al-Taqwim*, pp.85–86, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Qutaibah, *Kitab al-Anwa'*, pp.103 & 104; Al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, p.174; Al-Zabidi, *Taj al-'Arus*, vol.5 (Beirut: Al-Matba'at al-Khayirah, 1306 AH), pp.340–341; Al-Bayruni, *Al-Athar al-Baqiyah*, p.325.

<sup>17</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.16; Al-Zabidi, *Taj al-'Arus*, vol.5, pp.340–341 & 260; *Azminah*, vol.1, p.174.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Biruni, *Al-Atar al-Baqiyah*, p.325.

half year often termed summer or winter. Thus, it was applied to any of the four quarters of the year.

1. The first season, in the order in which they were normally used by the Arabs, that is, autumn, was called by the classical Arabs *al-Rabi'*, though it was known colloquially as *al-Kharif*. It was called by the former name because the first rain fell at that time, causing the herbage *al-Rabi'* to grow. The colloquial name was based on the fact that it was the time of the fruit harvest. The season began when the sun entered Libra.
2. The second season, winter, was called *al-Shitā'* and began when the sun entered Capricorn.
3. The third season, spring, was called *al-Şayf*. Its colloquial name was *al-Rabi'* and it began when the sun entered Aries.
4. The fourth season, summer, was called *al-Qyaz*. Its colloquial name was *al-Şayf* and it began when the sun entered Cancer.

Table 1.3 shows the principal divisions of the ancient Arab calendar. It lists the positions of the months of the solar year at the time when they were given the names that are used here.<sup>19</sup> It was said that the months were given these names by Kilab ibn Murrah, an ancestor of Prophet Muhammad, about two centuries before Islam.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 1.3** Alavi's division of the months & seasons

<i>AL-RABI'</i>			
Autumnal equinox	Arabic	Aramaic/Hebrew	Gregorian
September 11	Muharram	<i>Ailul</i>	September 3
	Safar	<i>Tishrin I</i>	October
	Rabi' I	<i>Tishrin II</i>	November

  

<i>AL-SHITĀ'</i>			
Winter solstice	Arabic	Aramaic/Hebrew	Gregorian
December 21	Rabi' II	<i>Kanun I</i>	December
	Jumada I	<i>Kanun II</i>	January
	Jumada II	<i>Shubat</i>	February

  

<i>AL-ŞAYF</i>			
Vernal equinox	Arabic	Aramaic/Hebrew	Gregorian
March 21	Rajab	<i>Adhar</i>	5 March
	Sha'ban	<i>Nisan</i>	April
	Ramadan	<i>Ayar</i>	May

  

<i>AL-QAYZ</i>			
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<sup>19</sup> Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, p.1254.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Summer Solstice	Arabic	Aramaic/Hebrew	Gregorian
June 21	Shawwal	<i>Haziran</i>	June 4
	Dhu al-Qa‘dah	<i>Tammuz</i>	July
	Dhu al-Hijjah	<i>Abb</i>	August

Lane’s division of the seasons and the months in relation to the solar year differs from that of Alavi, which is based on al-Byruni’s arrangement. Alavi says: “If we spread al-Bayruni’s Arab crop-year arrangement of Rabi‘ I, *al-Shitā’*, *al-Şayf* (Rabi‘ II), and *al-Qayz* over the year, and start from Muharram, going to *Dhu al-Hijjah*, the result would be as [in Table 1.3].”<sup>21</sup>

A *rabi‘* is a part of the year. According to the Arabs, there were two *rabi‘*’s: that of the months and that of the seasons. The *rabi‘* of the months fell two months after the month of Safar. They were given that name because they came in that season, and the name stuck even if they came in different seasons. The *rabi‘* of the seasons took two forms. Rabi‘ I followed winter. It was the season in which the mushrooms and flowers grew and so it was known as the Rabi‘ of Pasture. Rabi‘ II was the season in which the fruit ripened. It was called *al-Kharif* (autumn) by some Arabs, who also referred to *al-Rabi‘ I* as *al-Rabi‘ II*.

However, it was generally agreed that *al-Kharif* was Rabi‘ I (spring). Abu Hanifah said:

The two parts of winter are called two *rabi‘*’s. The first is the *rabi‘* of water and rain. The second is the *rabi‘* of grass, because that is when the grass grows to its maximum height....The whole winter is a *rabi‘* to the Arabs because of the moisture.<sup>22</sup>

The Arabs divided the year into six *azminah* (seasons): two months of al-Rabi‘ al-Awwal (the first spring), two months of *al-Şayf* (summer), two months of *al-Qayz* (high summer), two months of al-Rabi‘ al-Thani (the second spring), two months of *al-Kharif* (autumn), and two months of *al-Shitā’* (winter).<sup>23</sup>

Al-Azhari said:

The Arabs say that the year comprises four seasons. The season of *Şayf* (summer) is the spring of the pasture, and includes the months of Adhar (March), Nissan (April), and Ayyar (May). After it comes the season of al-Qaiz (high summer), consisting of the months of *Huzayran* (June), *Tammuz* (July), and *Abb* (August). That is followed by the season of al-Kharif (autumn), which comprises the months of *Ailul* (September), *Tishrin al-Awwal* (October), and *Tishrin al-Thani* (November). Then comes the season of *al-Shitā’* (winter),

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<sup>21</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, pp.16–17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Zabidi, *Taj al‘Arus*, vol.5, pp.340–341.



which includes the months of *Kanun al-Awwal* (December), *Kanun al-Thani* (January), and *Shubat* (February).<sup>24</sup>

According to Al-Asma‘i, *al-Kharif* (autumn) was indicated by the first rainfall at the beginning of the winter, which came during the date harvest. Then there followed *al-Wasmi* (rain), which fell through the winter. After that came the spring, the summer, and then *al-Hamim* (high summer).<sup>25</sup>

Abu Zayd listed the seasons as follows. The first rain was *al-Wasmi*, followed by *al-Shatawi*, *al-Dafa‘i*, *al-Şaif* (summer), *al-Hamim* (high summer), and finally *al-Kharif* (autumn). That was why the year was divided into six seasons.<sup>26</sup>

Abu Hanifa commented that originally *al-Kharif* was not the name of a season, but of the rain that fell during al-Qaiz (high summer). Consequently, that part of the year was given the name *al-Kharif*.<sup>27</sup> Al-Ghanawi said: “The whole of the Hijaz has rain during *al-Kharif*, yet Najd does not have any rain at that time.”<sup>28</sup>

As explained above, the Arabs calculated their agricultural seasons by the rising of the stars, rather than the movements of the sun or the moon. They composed rhyming proverbs to describe the weather and pastoral conditions during the rising and setting of a particular star, as detailed below. These proverbs became an integral part of their daily lives.

### **Stars Assigned to Summer and Winter**

The first of the summer stars was *al-Thurayyah* or *al-Najm* (Pleiades). The Arabs would say: “When *al-Najm* rises, the heat intensifies.”

*Al-Dabaran* (Taurus): “When *al-Dabaran* rises, the high solid places become very hot and the flies are driven crazy.”

*Al-Jawza’* (Gemini): “When *al-Jawza’* rises, the hard rocks grow hot, the deer seek shelter from the heat, and the chameleon remains still among the branches.”

*Al-Shi‘rā* (Sirius, Dog Star): “When *al-Shi‘rā* rises, the owner of the palm trees begins to see the fruits.”

*Al-‘Udhrah* (Virgo): “When *al-‘Udhrah* rises, the early morning humidity becomes very heavy and distressing.”

*Al-Nathrah* (Cancer): “When *al-Nathrah* rises, the dates turn red.”

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.260.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘Arus*, vol.6, p.82.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; see also, al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol1, p.165, where he comments: “That was the division of the people of al-Hijaz.”

<sup>28</sup> Al-Zabidi, *Taj al-‘Arus*, vol.6, p.82.

*Al-Jabhah* (Leo): “When *al-Jabhah* rises, the palm tree becomes coloured [with fruit].”

*Suhail* (Canopus): “When *Suhail* rises, the nights become cold, and woe to the young camel.” (The bedouin wean the young camels at this time.)

*Al-Simak* (Arcturus and Spica Virginis): “When *al-Simak* rises, the heat becomes less intense.”

*Al-Iklil* (Libra): “When *al-Iklil* rises, all animals come into heat.”

*Al-Baldah* (Capricorn): “When *al-Baldah* rises, camels and sheep grow lively.”

*Al-Simak* is the last of the summer stars.

### **According to the Arabs, the winter stars were as follows:**

*Al-‘Aqrab* (Scorpio): “When *al-‘Aqrab* rises, the water channels freeze, the grasshoppers die, and the frost appears.”

*Al-Na‘a‘im* (Sagittarius): “When *al-Na‘a‘im* rises, the animals grow cold and the clouds increase.”

*Al-Nasran*: “When *al-Nasran* rises, the fat animals grow lean, the kids become very cold, and life is very difficult.”

*Sa‘d al-Dhabih* (Aquarius): “When *Sa‘d al-Dhabih* rises, the dog cannot bark because of the intense cold, and water flows.

*Sa‘d al-Su‘ud* (Capricorn Aquarius): “When *Sa‘d al-Su‘ud* rises, all frozen objects thaw, the trees turn green, and all hibernating animals move around.”

*Al-Dalwu* (Aquarius): “When *al-Dalwu* rises, spring arrives and people go in search of pasture.”

*Al-Sharatan* (Aries): “When *al-Sharatan* rises, the weather warms up and the homeless sleep anywhere.”

*Al-Ghafr* (Virgo): “When *al-Ghafr* rises, the rain comes.”

*Al-Zubana* (Libra): “When *al-Zubana* rises, the mouth feels cold, and you should store food for your family.”

*Al-Qalb* (Scorpio): “When *al-Qalb* rises, winter comes like a dog, and the desert people suffer hardship.”

*Bula’* (Aquarius): “When *Bula’* rises, animals complain about their pasture.”

*Al-Samakah* (Pisces): “When *al-Samakah* rises, the thorn bushes dry out.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Muhammad ibn al-Mustanir Qutrub, *Kitab al-Azminah wa Talbiyat al-Jahiliyyah*, ed.

## **The Naming of the Days and Months**

The ancient Arabs used different names for the days and months than those with which we are familiar in modern times. However, to date no evidence has been found to indicate when the new system replaced the old system. A comparison of the two systems is given in Table 1.4.

**Table 1.4** Names of the days of the week: A comparison

<b>Current name: Arabic (English)</b>	<b>Ancient name</b>
<i>Al-Ahad</i> (Sunday)	Awwal
<i>Al-Ithnayn</i> (Monday)	Ahwan
<i>Al-Thalatha'</i> (Tuesday)	Jubar
<i>Al-Arbi'a'</i> (Wednesday)	Dubar
<i>Al-Khamis</i> (Thursday)	Mu'nis
<i>Al-Jum'ah</i> (Friday)	Arubah
<i>Al-Sabt</i> (Saturday)	Shiyar

Source: Qutrub, *Kitab al-Azminah*, p.112; al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, pp.269–270; Al-Farra', *Al-Ayyam wa al-Layali wa al-Shuhur*, Ibrahim al-Abyari (ed.), (Cairo: 1956), p.37.

Just as the ancient Arabs gave different names to the days of the week, so they also coined different names for the months of the year. In fact, there were two ancient systems of names: one devised by the “original Arabs” (*al-'Arab al-'Aribah*), and the other attributed to later generations of Arabs. In addition to these ancient systems, there is the current system.

**Table 1.5** Names of the months of the year: A comparison

<b>Current name</b>	<b>Ancient name</b>	<b>Al-'Arab al-'Aribah</b>
Al-Muharram	Al-Mu'tamir	<i>Mujib</i>
Safar	Najir	<i>Mujiz</i>
Rabi' al-Awwal	Khawan	<i>Murid</i>
Rabi' al-Thani	Wabsan	<i>Mulzij</i>
Jumada al-Ula	Al-Hamim	<i>Musdir</i>
Jumada al-Akhirah	Warnah	<i>Hubar</i>
Rajab	Al-Asam	<i>Muwail</i>
Sha'ban	'Adhil	<i>Muhib</i>
Ramadan	Natiq	<i>Dhaimar</i>
Shawwal	Wa'il	<i>Jaifal</i>
Dhu al-Qa'dah	Warnah	<i>Muhlis</i>
Dhu al-Hijjah	Burak	Musbil

Source: Qutrub, *Kitab al-Azminah*, p.129; al-Abyari (ed.), Al-Farra' *Al-Ayyam wa al-Layali wa al-Shuhur*, pp.49–53; al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, pp.305–306.

## Seasons into Months

To understand the nature of the ancient Arab calendar, the names of the Arab months themselves need to be studied. According to al-Marzuqi's detailed description, the Arabs, when naming their months, would take into consideration the seasons that fell within these months as well as other factors.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the first month, al-Muharram, was called Safar in ancient times. At some point, it was declared a *haram* or sacred month and thus became known as Muharram. Otherwise, the months of both Muharram and Safar were called *al-Safarayn*, or the two *Safars*. *Safar* fell at the beginning of winter, that is, in the autumn.

*Al-Safariyyah* was the name given to a grass that grew in early winter.<sup>31</sup> It also referred to the period ranging from the end of summer to the beginning of winter.<sup>32</sup> Even the goats born during the two months were called *Safariyyah*.<sup>33</sup> It can be concluded, therefore, that in ancient times, the first month of the Arab year occurred close to the autumnal equinox.<sup>34</sup>

According to the ancient Arabs, al-Rabi' I and II, that is, the spring months, began with the rainy season, which occurred in October and November. Then there follow the two Jumada months, which indicated winter. Al-Marzuqi says that he has not found any reference to a connection between the two Jumadas and summer. In classical Arab poetry, these two months are invariably connected with winter, for example, in the work of Labid ibn Rabi'ah. Abu Sa'id stated: "Jumada for the Arabs means winter because water freezes at that time."<sup>35</sup> Abu Hanifah said: "Jumada for the Arabs is the whole of the winter, whether it is in Jumada or other months."<sup>36</sup>

Jumada I is the fifth month and Jumada II the sixth month of the year.<sup>37</sup> They are followed by *Rajab*, *Sha'ban*, and Ramadan. The name of the last month conveys the idea of intense heat.<sup>38</sup> Rajab was given its name by the Arabs because during the *Jahiliyyah* they honoured it by abstaining from war throughout that month. It is

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<sup>30</sup> Al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, pp.16–17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, vol.4, pp.462–463; al-Zabidi, *Taj al-'Arus*, vol.3, p.337.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, vol.4, pp.462–463; Muhammad bn Ya'qub al-Fayruzabadi, *Al-Qamus al-Muhit*, vol.2, 2nd edn. (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1371 AH/1952 AC), p.71; al-Marzuqi, *Azminah*, vol.1, pp.167–168.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>34</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.17.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Marzuqi, *Al-Azminah*, vol.1, pp.167–168.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*, vol.3, pp.129–130.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.18.

mentioned in the Hadith literature that the Rajab of Mudar fell between Jumada and Sha‘ban. Rajab and Sha‘ban were called al-Rajaban, that is, the two Rajabs.<sup>39</sup> Ibn Durayd said that when the Arabs took the names of the months from the ancient language, they called them by the names of the seasons in which they occurred. Therefore, since Ramadan coincided with the days of intense heat, so it was named after that.<sup>40</sup> Shawwal is the name of the month following Ramadan, and it is the first of the Hajj (pilgrimage) months.<sup>41</sup> It was given this name because it fell in the season when the camels’ milk dried up and the she-camels raised their tails as a sign of their being pregnant. It also indicated the end of the date season.<sup>42</sup> The month of Dhu al-Qa‘dah followed Shawwal. This was the time when the Arabs rested from their work and then went on pilgrimage during the next month, Dhu al-Hijjah. Dhu al-Qa‘dah was given that name because the Arabs stayed at home, refraining from raiding, trading, or going away in search of pasture.<sup>43</sup>

It can be concluded, therefore, that the months of Dhu al-Qa‘dah and Dhu al-Hijjah fell during the period between two seasons, namely, summer and winter. This was what is known as the “fall,” when everything died down and people had no work to do in the fields or in moving their animals to distant places. Therefore, Dhu al-Qa‘dah could be considered here the month of preparation for travel to Makkah for the Hajj. Dhu al-Hijjah was the month of pilgrimage, and al-Muharram the month for the pilgrims’ return home from Makkah.

The ancient Arabs’ designation of the Hajj period to coincide with the fall, when neither the crops nor the animals needed much attention, is supported by the account in the *Sirah* of the Tabuk campaign, which took place during the summer. According to Ka‘b ibn Malik in the *Sirah*,

He [the Prophet] raided it [Tabuk] in extreme heat... The Prophet made that expedition when the fruits were ripe and shade was desirable, so that over eighty men were opposed to it.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol.3, pp.129–130.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, vol7, pp.161–162,

<sup>41</sup> It is not clear what is meant by this statement. Did this occur before or after Islam, since Shawwal became one of the months of the Hajj during the Islamic period, not during the *Jahiliyah*.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol..11, p.377.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.357.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad ibn Ishaq, *Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.611; al-Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol.6, p.4; Al-Maqrizi, *Imta‘ al-Asma‘*, vol.1, p.447, which contains the following statement: *wa kana al-nasu fi harrin shadid, wa huna tabati al-thimar, wa uhibba al-zilal wa al-nasu yuhibbuna al-muqam, wa yakrahuna al-shukhusa ‘anha*.

Apart from the above philological evidence, which is more convincing than historical evidence, Margoliouth declares that during the pre-Islamic period, according to the ancient Greek writers, the three Arab months of autumn and one of spring were declared the *haram* (sacred) months.<sup>45</sup> These Greek sources stated that two of the months occurred after the Summer Solstice and one in mid-spring.<sup>46</sup>

Some traditions furnish evidence that in pre-Islamic days, the Jewish and Arab calendars began with the same season. *Fara*<sup>47</sup> and *'atirah*<sup>48</sup> were offered in sacrifice to the pagan gods, either as a thanksgiving after the fulfillment of a prayer, or when a flock reached the total of one hundred head. The head of the idols before which the sacrifice was performed was smeared with the blood of the victims. These sacrifices or *rajabiyah* were made in the month of Rajab, that is, in the spring, and the victims were, in principle, the first-born. With these two points in mind, there appears to be a close connection with the sacrifice that took place during the *'Umrah*, and with the Jewish Passover and the rituals that introduce a scapegoat.<sup>49</sup> Prophet Muhammad forbade these sacrifices.

Wellhausen has compared the Hebrew festival celebrated in the month of Nisan to the Rajab festival of the Arabs.<sup>50</sup> This is because the Jews also celebrated this festival in the days when the sun was in Aries, and they offered the first fruits of their produce and yearling goats and sheep at the altar of Jehovah.<sup>51</sup>

It can therefore be concluded that in pre-Islamic times, the Jewish and Arab calendars began from the same point and, like Rajab, the Jewish Nisan was the seventh month of the year. In addition, both months were related to the beginning of spring.<sup>52</sup>

There is further supporting evidence in the cluster of *'Ashura*' traditions found in the Hadith. The classical Islamic sources report various hadiths referring to the Prophet's custom of fasting during *'Ashura*'. This has prompted some modern

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<sup>45</sup> Muhammad Margoliouth, *Mohammad and the Rise of Islam*, 3rd edn. (New York, G.P. Putnam, 1905), p.5; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.18.

<sup>46</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.18.

<sup>47</sup> *Fara* ' was the first offspring of the camel, sheep, or goat, which, in the pre-Islamic era, the Arabs used to sacrifice to their gods in the hope of receiving a blessing thereby.

<sup>48</sup> *'Atirah* was the sheep or goat that the Arabs used to sacrifice to their gods or their idols in the month of Rajab. It was also called the *rajabiyah*.

<sup>49</sup> Gibb et al. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol.1, p.739.

<sup>50</sup> W.R. Smith, *Religion of the Semites* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp.227–228; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.19.

<sup>51</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.19.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

scholars, for example, A.J. Wensinck, to state that fasting during ‘*Ashura*’ was a custom that the Prophet had copied from the Jews:

‘*Ashura*’, name of a voluntary fast-day which is observed on the 10th of *al-Muharram*. When Muhammad came to Madinah he adopted from the Jews amongst other days the ‘*Ashura*’. The name is obviously the Hebraic = ‘*Asor*...it is used of the great Day of Atonement.... On which day of the Arabian year the fast was originally observed cannot now be ascertained owing to our defective knowledge of the calendar of the period; naturally its observance coincided with the Jewish on the 10th of Tishri, and so fell in the autumn. The 10th of *al-Muharram* finds early mention as the ‘*Ashura*’; probably the tenth day of the first Muslim month was selected to harmonize with the tenth day of the first of the Jewish months. From the calculations, which have already been made, it does not seem possible that it could have been originally celebrated on the 10th of *al-Muharram* (see Caetani, *Annali*, i, 431f.)...

The Jewish origin of the day is obvious; the well-known tendency of tradition to trace all Islamic customs back to the ancient Arabs, and particularly to Abraham, states that the Makkans of olden times fasted in ‘*Ashura*’. It is not impossible that the tenth, as also the first nine days of *al-Muharram*, did possess a certain holiness among the ancient Arabs; but this has nothing to do with the ‘*Ashura*’.<sup>53</sup>

Abu Dawud al-Sijistani reported an interesting tradition narrated by Ibn ‘Abbas regarding ‘*Ashura*’:

When the Prophet fasted on ‘*Ashura*’ and ordered us to fast on that day, some people said: “O Messenger of God! This is a day that the Jews and the Christians honor.” The Prophet said: “Next year we will fast on the ninth.” However, the Messenger of God joined the Supreme Companion before the next year came.<sup>54</sup>

That the Christians also observed the day of ‘*Ashura*’ is a useful piece of information in this tradition. It can be concluded, therefore, that the Jews, the Christians, and the Quraish – but not the people of Madinah – observed this day in the *Jahiliyyah*

According to some classical Islamic sources, when the Prophet reached Madinah, he found the Jews fasting on the Day of ‘*Ashura*’, in fact the 10th of their Tishri, which always fell in September–October.<sup>55</sup> Ibn ‘Abbas reported:

When the Prophet arrived in Madinah, he found the Jews fasting. Thereupon he asked: “What is this?” He was told that on that day God had saved the Sons of Israel from their enemies, so Moses had fasted during that time. The Prophet said: “We are more closely related to Moses than you are.” Therefore, the Prophet fasted on that day and ordered [the Muslims] to fast as well.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> H.A.R. Gibb et al., *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1961), pp.47–48.

<sup>54</sup> Abu Dawud, *Al-Sunan*, vol.2, pp.818–819.

<sup>55</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.20.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol.3, p.124; Ibn Majah, *Al-Sunan*, vol.1 (Hims, Syria: Dar al-Hadith,



Abu Musa al-Ash‘ari reported: “The Day of ‘*Ashura*’ was considered a holiday by the Jews. So the Prophet said: ‘I recommend you [Muslims] to fast on this day.’”<sup>57</sup>

These reports indicate that the Prophet fasted on the day when the Jews had their ‘*Ashura*’ fast, which was the 10th of Tishri, the first month of their calendar. This leads to the conclusion that, at least in the year when they fasted in Madinah for the first time, the Arab month of al-Muharram corresponded exactly to the Jewish Tishri, which always fell during the autumnal equinox.<sup>58</sup> It is, however, wrong to conclude that the Prophet fasted on that day because the Jews did so.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the Quraish of Makkah also fasted on that day in pre-Islamic times, according to a report from ‘A’ishah, the Prophet’s wife:

The Quraish used to fast on the Day of ‘*Ashura*’ in the pre-Islamic period, and the Messenger of God too used to fast on that day. When he came to Madinah, he fasted on that day and ordered other Muslims to fast as well. Later, when fasting during the month of Ramadan was prescribed, he abandoned fasting on the Day of ‘*Ashura*’ and it became optional.<sup>60</sup>

Further, just as the Jews performed the annual cleansing ceremony of their sanctuary on that day, so did the Quraysh, and they decorated and covered the Ka‘bah afresh on the Day of ‘*Ashura*’.<sup>61</sup> ‘A’ishah said: “The Quraysh, before the binding declaration of Ramadan, used to fast on ‘*Ashurah*’ and covered the Ka‘bah afresh on that day.”<sup>62</sup> Alavi commented on ‘A’ishah’s traditions:

The two narrations of ‘A’ishah, when read together, mean that this ceremony was common in the entire Semitic world, or, was at any rate, shared among the northern Arabs. If Jerusalem was cleaned on that day, the Makkan sanctuary was also covered afresh on the same day; and if the Palestinians fasted on that day, so did the Arabs.<sup>63</sup>

A.J. Wensinck further comments on the tradition of covering the Ka‘bah:

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1394/1974), Vol. 1, p.552; Ibn Khuzayman, *Sahih*, vol.3 (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 1390AH), Vol.3, p.286; al-Darimi, *Al-Sunan* (Hims, Syria: Dar al-Hadith, 1394/1974), Vol.2, p.22.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Ibn abi Shaibah, *Al-Musannaf fi al-Ahadith wa al Athar*, ed. Kamal Yusuf al-Hout, vol.3 (Beirut: Dar al-Taj, 1409 AH/1989 AC), p.55.

<sup>58</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.20.

<sup>59</sup> Margoliouth, *Rise o Islam*, p.250; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.20.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol.3, p.124; Ibn Majah, *Sunan*, vol.1, p.552; Ibn Khuzaimah, *Sahih*, vol.3, ed. Muhammad Mustafa al-A’zami (Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 1395 AH/1975 AC), p.286; al-Darimi, *Sunan*, vol.2, p.22.

<sup>61</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.21.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, p.48.

<sup>63</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.21.

The Tubba' is regarded as the first who covered the Ka'bah. Whether this tradition is historically correct is beyond our knowledge. It is noteworthy that the colored cloths are mentioned which were placed over the building, a rite which one has to consider in connection with similar rites used in other cases. The Jewish tabernacle, the high places of Canaan (Ezekial xvi.16), the throne of Solomon, the throne of the bishops, the *mahmal*, and the sacred tents in ancient Arabia as well as *Sidrat al-Muntaha* in Paradise are all covered with colored cloths. It is misleading to give a general explanation of all such things. But the idea of a connection with the sun shining in the heavens suggests itself here; particularly for the *Sidra* this notion can be traced further. The question might even be asked whether and how far the Ka'bah is an astral symbol. For the affirmative there is the object of *tawaf* and that *tawaf* and Ka'bah are represented by Muslim tradition itself as connected with the host of spirits round the Throne of God. The Throne of God is, as is well known, of cosmic magnitude, and the Ka'bah and the Black Stone are described as the throne of God's *khalifah* (caretaker) on earth, Adam. The dance of the heavenly spirits can easily be interpreted as a dance of the planets. Moreover, golden suns and moons are repeatedly mentioned among the votive gifts (al-Azraqi, p.155 seq.). According to al-Mas'udi (*Muruj*, iv. p.47), certain people regarded the Ka'bah as a temple dedicated to the sun, the moon and the five planets. The 360 idols placed around the Ka'bah also point in this direction. It can therefore hardly be denied that traces exist of an astral symbolism. At the same time one can safely say that there can be no question of any general conception on these lines. The cult at the Ka'bah was in the heathen period syncretic, as is usual in heathenism. How far also North Semitic cults were represented in Makkah cannot be exactly ascertained.

... The dove of aloes wood which Muhammad (peace be upon him) found in the *Ka'bah* may have been devoted to the Semitic Venus.<sup>64</sup>

In this connection, the commentary by Ibn 'Abbas on the verse "*wa al-fajri. wa layalin 'ashr*" (Qur'an, 89:1-2) is quite interesting and so is the explanation of al-Muharram by 'Ubayd ibn 'Umair. In one of the interpretations by Ibn 'Abbas, he says: "*wa al-fajri. wa layalin 'ashr*" means: the dawn of the year, that is, al-Muharram and its first ten nights till '*Ashura*'."<sup>65</sup> 'Ubaid ibn 'Umayr said: "Muharram is the month of God and the beginning of the year, when the House of God [al-Ka'bah] is covered afresh, from which date the people count the days of the year, and when the silver is minted."<sup>66</sup>

All these narrations prove that the '*Ashura*' fast by the Prophet was not observed in imitation of the Jewish custom. The Quraysh themselves held the day to be sacred. Incidentally, the narrations also prove that the fast was not in vogue among the people of Madinah, as shown in the following tradition reported by Salamah ibn al-Akwa':

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<sup>64</sup> Gibbs et al., *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, p.198;

<sup>65</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.21; al-Ṭabari, *Tafsir*, vol.30, p.107; Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah fi al-Ta'rikh*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1412 AH/1992 AC), vol.3, p.207.

<sup>66</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidayah*, vol.3, p.207; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.21.

The Prophet ordered a man of the tribe of Aslam to announce amongst the people [of Madinah] that whoever had eaten should fast the rest of the day, and whoever had not eaten should continue his fast, because that day was the Day of 'Ashura'.<sup>67</sup>

Another tradition, reported by al-Rubayyi' bint Mu'awwadh, states that this announcement was restricted to the Ansar localities:

The Prophet sent a man to the villages of the Ansar in the morning of the Day of 'Ashura' to announce: "Whoever has eaten something should not eat any more but complete the fast, and whoever is observing the fast should complete it."

Since then, we used to fast on that day regularly and make our children fast. We used to make dolls of wool for them, and if any one of them cried for food, he was given those dolls to play with until it was time to break the fast.<sup>68</sup>

According to Alavi, this tradition is convincing proof of the fact that during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad, the Arab Muharram and the Jewish Teshri always coincided exactly, or at least frequently. This arrangement was possible only by adopting the *kabisah* (intercalary system) rule and placing the beginning of the Arab calendar at the autumnal equinox.<sup>69</sup>

Sachau concluded:

"It is, however, wrong to assume that *al-Muharram* moved in the first of the *Hijrah* so as to coincide with the month of *Tishri*, an assumption that led al-Biruni to draw erroneous conclusions and finally declare all the genuine 'Ashura' traditions as spurious."<sup>70</sup> Al-Biruni's calculations are correct according to the lunar calendar, but in his zeal, he overlooked the luni-solar system that was in vogue during the lifetime of the Prophet.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Al-Nasi'***

#### **DEFINITION**

It was a month that the Arabs during the era of paganism until the last year of the life of Prophet Muhammad postponed from one year to the next. This arrangement is forbidden in the Qur'an:

Indeed, the transposing [of a sacred month] is an addition to unbelief. In this way the unbelievers are led into wrongdoing, for they make it lawful one year and forbidden the next, in order to adjust the number of months forbidden by God and make the forbidden [months] lawful. The evil of their course seems pleasing to them. But God does not guide those who reject faith. (9:37)

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<sup>67</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol.3, p.125; Ibn Majah, *Sunan*, vol.1, p.552; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.21.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol.3, pp.103–104; Ibn Khuzaymah, *Sahih*, p.288; Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, pp.21–22.

<sup>69</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.22.

<sup>70</sup> Sachau, *Chronology*, p.327, as quoted in Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, pp.12 & 22.

<sup>71</sup> Alavi, *The Arab Calendar*, p.22.

The postponement of a month meant the postponement of the sacredness of that month and transferring it to another month.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

During the pilgrimage season in the era of the *Jahiliyyah*, when the Arabs returned from *Mina* (the last rite of the pilgrimage), it was customary for a man of the tribe of Kinanah to arise and say:

“I am he whose decree is not rejected,” or, “Verily, I am not to be accused of a shameful deed, nor is my saying (or decree), to be rejected.” Whereupon they would say, “Postpone for us a month,” i.e., “Postpone for us the sacredness of *al-Muharram*, and transfer it to *Safar*,” for they disliked that three months during which they might not make predatory expeditions should come upon them consecutively, as their sustenance was obtained by such expeditions. So he made *al-Muharram* free from restrictions for them. As we learn from the Qur’an the *Nasi’* was not done every year, but every other year. All the Arab tribes observed the sacredness of the sacred months, except for the tribes of *Tayyi’* and *Khath’am* who did not observe the sacred months. Therefore the *Nasi’* made it lawful to slay them therein when they [were] aggressors.<sup>72</sup>

According to al-Kalbi, the first to postpone the sacred months was Malik ibn Kinanah from the tribe of Mudar. He had married the daughter of Mu‘awiyah ibn Thawr al-Kindi, and the *nasa’ah* (intercalation) was in the hands of the tribe of Kindah, because they were the kings of all the Arabs of Rabi‘ah and Mudar. The *nasa’ah* was then passed to al-Haryth ibn Malik ibn Kinanah, who was called al-Qalammas, and after him to Surayr ibn al-Qalammas. Finally, it shifted to the Banu Fuqaim from the tribe of Tha‘labah and remained in their hands until the rise of Islam. The last person among them to practice *nasi’* was Abu Thumamah Junadah ibn ‘Awf ibn ‘Umayyah ibn ‘Abd ibn Fuqayn, who came to the Black Stone during the time of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab.

When he saw the people crowded around it, he said: “I am its protector, move away from it.”

However, ‘Umar struck him with his whip, saying: “You uncivil, crude person. God erased your glory with Islam.”

All these men practiced *nasi’* during the *Jahiliyyah*.<sup>73</sup> According to al-Ya‘qubi, the first person to postpone the sacredness of the sacred months was Surair ibn Tha‘labah ibn al-Harith ibn Malik ibn Kinanah.<sup>74</sup> Ibn ‘Abas and al-Dahhak reported

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<sup>72</sup> Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, part 8, p.2706; Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makkah*, vol.1, pp.113ff. & 126.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makkah*, vol.1, pp.113ff. & 125–126.

<sup>74</sup> Al-Ya‘qubi, *Ta’rikh*, vol.1 (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1379 AH/1960 AC), p.237.

that the tribes of Hawazin, Ghatafan and Banu Sulaym used to practice the *nasi'* in the *Jahiliyyah*.<sup>75</sup>

The early Muslim historians were not certain when the practice of the *nasi'* was begun and who began it. However, some traditions mention that it was practiced by the Banu al-Qays ibn Kinanah during the time of Qusay ibn Kilab.<sup>76</sup> According to al-Ṭabari:

In the *Jahiliyyah*, a man known by the name of al-Qalammas from the Banu Kinanah wanted to attack certain people during the Sacred Month.

However, his people said to him: "This is the sacred month of al-Muharram."

He replied: "We will postpone it this year, and there will be two months of Safar this year. Next year we will compensate and make both of the two Safars sacred." And so he did. The following year, he said: "Do not carry out any raids during Safar and make it sacred with al-Muharram."

Al-Ṭabari commented: "This is the *insa'*."<sup>77</sup>

It should be noted that in al-Ṭabari's report there is no mention of a month added to or deleted from the year. Rather, the early Arabs postponed the sacredness of the month and made up for it the following year by making sacred two consecutive months: Muharram and Safar. This manoeuvre solved the problem of adding a month to the year and making the following year thirteen months long. As Abu Malik reported: "They used to make the year thirteen months by making Muharram a Safar."<sup>78</sup>

This idea made many scholars believe that the Arabs in the *Jahiliyyah* used an intercalation system by adding a month every three years or by adding eleven days every year to the lunar year to keep the pilgrimage in its season every year.

Another opinion is that the early Arabs went on the pilgrimage two years in a row in each month by changing the names of the months. It was reported on the authority of Mujahid:

God ordained the Hajj in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah. The pagans used to name the months Dhu al-Hijjah, al-Muharram, Safar, Rabi' I and Rabi' II, Sha'ban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhu al-Qa'dah. They would perform the Hajj in Dhu al-Hijjah, and then keep silent about al-Muharram.<sup>79</sup> They would call it Safar, then Rajab, Jumada al-Akhirah.<sup>80</sup> Then they would call Sha'ban

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<sup>75</sup> Al-Ṭabari, *Tafsir*, vol.10, p.92.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Ya'qubi, *Ta'rikh*, vol.1, p.238.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Ṭabari, *Tafsir*, vol.10, pp.92 & 93.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> It seems here that they deleted that month from the year altogether.

<sup>80</sup> Al-Ṭabari in his *Tafsir* did not report what the early Arabs did with the months of Rabi' I and II and Jumada al-Ula. However, al-Azraqi in his *Akhbar Makkah*, vol.1, pp.113ff & 126, described in detail the changing of the names of the months: "They call Safar and Rabi'

Ramadan, then Ramadan Shawwal, and then Dhu al-Qa‘dah Shawwal.<sup>81</sup> Then they would call Dhu al-Hijjah Dhu al-Qa‘dah, then they would call al-Muharram Dhu al-Hijjah and perform the Hajj in it. Then they would do that again. As a result, they performed the Hajj in the same month for two years until the Hajj that Abu Bakr performed fell in Dhu al-Qa‘dah at the end of the cycle. Then the Prophet performed the Hajj in Dhu al-Hijjah the following year. That is why he said: “Indeed, time has returned to its original state as on the day when God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>82</sup>

What the Prophet meant was that the month of the Hajj returned to its correct position, that is, Dhu al-Hijjah, and the *nasi‘* was abolished once and for all.<sup>83</sup>

According to Iyas ibn Mu‘awiyah:

The pagans used to make the year twelve months and fifteen days. Therefore, the Hajj used to take place in Ramadan and Dhu al-Qa‘dah, as well as in each month of the year, because of the month revolving on account of the addition of the fifteen days.<sup>84</sup>

This could be a form of intercalation to which the pagans resorted, rather than a haphazard addition to the year. If it were an intercalation, the lunar year would have been more stable. The annual seasons would have come at the same time, instead of rotating through the year as they currently do because of the lack of intercalation to synchronize the lunar year with the solar year.

Moreover, the above statement by Iyas ibn Mu‘awiyah has inspired some modern scholars to conclude that the pagan Arabs added a month every two years, so that the cycle would consist of twenty-five years. This would mean that they intercalated twelve months every twenty-four lunar years.<sup>85</sup>

Al-Zamakhshari reported that the Arabs used to increase the number of months to thirteen or fourteen to gain time (for raiding).<sup>86</sup> Al-Suhayli said that they used to postpone the Hajj from its lunar date to match the solar year, so that they postponed

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al-Awwal the two Safars, and they call Tabi‘ al-Akhir and Jumada al-Ula the two Rabi‘ s. They call Sha‘ban Rajab, and they call Ramadan Sha‘ban. They call Shawwal Ramadan, and they call Dhu al-Qa‘dah Shawwal, and they call Dhu al-Hijjah Dhu al-Qa‘dah. They call Safar the first which in essence was al-Muharram, the month which was postponed, Dhu al-Hijjah, and they perform the Hajj that year in al-Muharram.”

<sup>81</sup> It should be the opposite, that is, “they call Shawwal Dhu al-Qa‘dah,” because of what is mentioned before and after it.

<sup>82</sup> Al-Ṭabari, *Tafsir*, vol.10, pp.92–93; al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami‘ li Ahkam al-Qur’an*, repr. Dar al-Kutub edn., vol.8 (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, 1387 AH/1966 AC), p.137.

<sup>83</sup> Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami‘*, vol.8, p.137.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-Husayni, *Taqwim al-‘Arab fi al-Jahiliyah* (Alexandria: Matba‘at Jami‘at Al-Iskandariyyah, 1963), p. 62.

<sup>86</sup> Al-Zamakhshari, *Al-Kashshaf*, (Cairo: Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1385 AH/1966 AC), vol.2 pp.188–189; al-Husayni, *Taqwim al-‘Arab*, p.62.

it eleven days or a little more every year.<sup>87</sup> This means, as mentioned earlier, that they intercalated the exact difference between the solar and lunar years.

Al-Kalbi cleared the confusion about the *nasi'*, which, in his view, did not mean intercalation. Instead, it simply meant the “postponement of the sacredness of a sacred month,” or rather, the removal of that sacredness by dropping the month from the year altogether and adding it to the following year. In other words, they would make one year eleven months and the next year thirteen months.<sup>88</sup>

Most classical Muslim historians report that Abu Bakr performed the Hajj in the month of Dhu al-Qa‘dah in 9 AH. However, al-Azraqi reported that it took place in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah.<sup>89</sup> The following year, the Prophet also performed the Hajj in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah. There, in conformity with the Qur’an (9:37), he banned *nasi'* once and for all when he said in his sermon:

O people! Time has returned to its original state as on the day when God created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, no month will be postponed nor a calculation made incorrectly. Hajj must be performed in the month of Dhu al-Hijjah until the Day of Judgment.<sup>90</sup>

Ibn Kathir supported al-Azraqi’s report in his criticism of Mujahid’s report to the effect that Abu Bakr had performed the Hajj in Dhu al-Qad‘ah:

What Mujahid has said is doubtful. How could the Hajj of Abu Bakr have taken place in Dhu al-Qad‘ah when God says: “And an announcement from God and His Messenger, to the people on the Day of the Great Pilgrimage,” (Qur’an, 9:3). If it were not in Dhu al-Hijjah, God would not have referred to the “Day of the Great Pilgrimage.”

Furthermore, Ibn Kathir argued that *nasi'* did not mean adding or removing a month of the year. He explained his point as follows:

The number of months in the sight of God is twelve [in a year] – so it was ordained by Him on the day when he created the heavens and the earth. Of them, four are sacred. That is the straight path” (Qur’an, 9:36). The *nasi'* is the postponement of the sacredness of the month of *Muharram*, neither adding a month, nor deducting another.<sup>91</sup>

‘Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, in his comment on verse 9:36, said:

This and the following verse must be read together. They condemn the arbitrary and selfish conduct of the pagan Arabs, who, because there was a long-established custom of observing four months as those in which fighting

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<sup>87</sup> Al-SuhaYli, *Al-Rawd al-‘Unuf*, vol.4, ed. Ṭaha ‘Abd al-Ra’uf Sa’d (Beirut: Dar al-Ma‘rifah, 1398 AH/1978 AC), p.189; al-Husaini, *Taqwim al-‘Arab*, p.62.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makkah*, vol.1, pp.113ff. & 126–127.

<sup>89</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahab, *Mukhtasar Sirat al-Rasul* (Cairo: Al-Matba‘ah al-SalafiyYAH, 1396 AH), p.424.

<sup>90</sup> Gibb et al., *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*, p.123.

<sup>91</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Al-Bidayah*, vol.3, p.93.

was forbidden, changed the months about or added or deducted months when it suited them, to get an unfair advantage over the enemy. The four prohibited months were: *Dhu al-Qa'dah*, *Dhu al-Hijjah*, *Muharram*, and *Rajab*. If it suited them they postponed one of these months, and so a prohibited month became an ordinary month. While their opponents might hesitate to fight, they got an undue advantage. It also upset the security of the month of pilgrimage. This very ancient usage made for fair dealing all around, and its infraction by the pagans is condemned.

The question of a solar astronomical year as against the lunar ecclesiastical year does not arise here. But it may be noted that the Arab year was roughly luni-solar like the Hindu year, the months being lunar and the intercalation of a month every three years brought the year nearly but not accurately up to the solar reckoning.<sup>92</sup>

After all this discussion, there appears to be a conflation between the *nasi'* and the intercalation to put the lunar year on a par with the solar year so as to stay in line with the pasturing season, the agricultural seasons of planting and harvesting, the annual market fairs all over the Arabian Peninsula, and the pilgrimage season.

Since the Akkadians, Assyrians, and Jews practiced intercalation, the Arabs should have practiced it too. According to A.H. Sayce:

This contained 360 days and 12 months... The names of the months in Acadian and Assyrian are to be found on other tablets, together with the intercalary *Ve-Adar* of the Jews, which was needed with a year of only 360 days. The quotation I have made above from Censorious would seem to show that the Babylonian cycle was one of 12 years. Reckoning the solar year at 365 days, 60 intercalary days, or two *Ve-Adars*, would be required during this cycle. Consequently a *Ve-Adar* would be inserted in the calendar every sixth year. But it would be found that a year of 365 days only was too short by nearly a quarter of a day, and that the calendar at the end of every sixth year would differ from the true year by about a day and 11 hours. In 124 years the deficiency would amount to a whole month of 30 days, so that another intercalary month besides *Ve-Adar* would be needed. Accordingly we find the Acadians making use of a second *Nisan*, as well as of a second *Elul*; but it is difficult to say whether these were full months of 30 days each, or whether they were not intercalated whenever the priestly directors of the calendar discovered that the disagreement between it and the true year had become a serious matter.<sup>93</sup>

The *nasi'* position among the ancient Arabs was also a priestly position similar to those of the Babylonians. However, it seems that the Arab *nasi'* abused his position and tampered with the sacredness of the sacred months to promote war and havoc in Arabia, a practice that the Qur'an finally condemned and banned. Consequently, the Muslims abandoned the intercalation system, which put them in

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<sup>92</sup> A. Yusuf 'Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1998), p.448, n.1295.

<sup>93</sup> A.H. Sayce, *Astronomy and Astrology of the Babylonians, with Translations of the Tablets Relating to these Subjects* (San Diego, Ca.: Wizards Bookshel, 1981, p.160.



the dilemma of having two calendars: one Muslim–lunar, and the other Christian Gregorian–solar in line with their agricultural seasons.

Sayce explained the added month *Ve-Adar* as follows:

The month *Adar* would, therefore, denote “the dark” month of the mists; and we thus obtain not only an explanation of the Assyrian name of the last month of the year, but also an indication that the intercalary month belongs to the Acadian Calendar before the latter was borrowed by their Semitic neighbours.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.161.